

Anti-Memorials and the Art of Forgetting: Critical Reflections on a Memorial Design Practice

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The etymological roots of ‘monument’ and ‘memory’ are linked. Both evolve from words meaning *to remind* and *to be mindful*. Heidegger wrote: ‘Originally, *memory* means as much as devotion: a constant concentrated abiding with something – not just with something that has passed, but in the same way with what is present and with what may come.’¹ Memory and remembering are dynamic, fluid processes. While commemorative practices and memorial forms clearly shift over time – and this is widely researched – very few works speculate on the arts of forgetting as an essential part of these processes. Where remembering is seen as a positive act affirming the value of that which is remembered, forgetting is dismissed as a negation of that value. Where the memorial is an expression of this normative positive attitude, the anti-memorial explores, affirms and

celebrates a wider, inclusive and essentially subversive range of states within the diverse operations of memory.

This article examines two recent anti-memorial projects in my design practice: *An Anti-Memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims* – installed for the Melbourne Festival in St Kilda, Victoria, 2001 – and *The SIEVX Memorial Project* – mounted in Canberra during 2007. It discusses how designers and artists can reconsider the complex qualities of memory and remembrance practices, particularly as they relate to contemporary social and political movements and mores. Both projects question who is worthy of memorials, as well as the forms that contemporary memorials assume. These issues are framed by the contested notion of ‘forgetting’, its application to memorial making and its inevitable influence on collective memory.

There is an incongruity between the inherent changeability of landscapes and memories and conventional formal strategies of commemoration. If we think of memory not as an ideal record that can be pure or complete, but a periodic process of re-evaluation and reconstruction given changing contexts, do our ideas about designing memorials evolve? My research and design work tries to negotiate with these slippery qualities of memory and the forces which direct them as a way of generating memorial form. The design work presented here speculates on new programs for memorials which incorporate temporary and ephemeral processes. I have attempted to work with changeability as a generative and speculative condition, as well as simply an operative process. In doing this I was testing the assertion of James Young’s framework for anti-memorials: ‘Anti-memorials aim not to console but to provoke, not to remain fixed but to change, not to be everlasting but to disappear, not to be ignored by passers-by but to demand interaction, not to remain pristine but to invite their own violation and not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to drop it at the public’s feet.’²

Memorial design is constantly imbued with expectations of specificity and local identity within a typically national context of concern. For example, a national concern with terrorism or involvement in an overseas war has victims from specific communities who seek to express their grief in their own locale. My practice reflects upon this challenge and offers further speculation into how design can utilise ephemeral qualities of landscape and memory in an innovative manner to deal with these scales of context.

Further, it considers how anti-memorial design is a physical catalyst for social change and a form of design activism.

The projects discussed here deliberately deal with the complex qualities of memory and remembrance practices in relation to contemporary social and political issues. In the process of their design and making they show that such investigations of apparently apolitical emotional memorialising are unavoidably political. Both projects query whom we select as being worthy of memorials as well as the forms that contemporary memorials assume. I conclude with a general discussion framing contested notions of forgetting and their further role in memorial making.

THE ANTI-MEMORIAL TO HEROIN OVERDOSE VICTIMS, 2001

Most of my design practice to date has investigated the role of anti-memorials in the contemporary landscape. Anti-memorials, as the term suggests, begin to formalise impermanence and even celebrate their own transitory natures. James Young contends that they critique the illusion that the permanence of stone somehow guarantees the permanence of the idea it is memorialising.³ Further, memorials are often accepted uncritically as 'historical', that is, as the accurate record of knowledgeable hindsight. This assumption denies the role that memorials can play within developing understandings of current and on-going issues. *The Anti-memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims* specifically sought to challenge assumptions about memorials as a commemoration of people and events whose good intentions have been made clear by 'history'. It also explicitly focused on a continuing, contemporary circumstance.

The Anti-Memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims was a public installation that sought to humanise the 331 overdose deaths in Melbourne in 2000.⁴ The Memorial commemorated a group of people whose loss is not usually mourned in the public realm. In the normative sense, heroin users are seen as neither heroes nor victims. It was constructed in the inner city suburb of St Kilda, in one of Victoria's more politically contested landscapes, as part of the Melbourne Festival in October 2001. The Anti-Memorial consisted of three design insertions into the streetscape: a floral tribute, a stencilled landscape narrative and an embedded collection of memorial objects. Poppies, text and resin plaques formed a memorial along St Kilda's streets. The work was sited within three socially

A photograph showing a flower bed with numerous red flowers in the foreground. In the background, there is a building with large windows and a few people walking on the sidewalk. A tree trunk is visible on the left side of the frame.

A red metal tin, likely a vintage cigarette case, is shown open. Inside, there are several items: a small black and white photograph of a person, a pair of round-rimmed glasses, a silver pen, a small metal object (possibly a lighter or a small container), and some papers with text. The tin is resting on a dark surface. The text on the papers is partially legible and appears to be a mix of handwritten and printed text. The overall scene suggests a collection of personal or sentimental items.

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complex streetscapes in St Kilda. Intravenous drug users, sex workers and social support services occupy the Grey Street corridor. The Fitzroy Street commercial end is frequented by a broad demographic of consumers of the strip shopping and dining precinct. Tourists, families and shoppers populate the Sunday craft market along the Lower Esplanade. The Anti-Memorial confronted each group, asking them to reconsider how they perceived intravenous drug users.

The floral tribute consisted of red poppies, which were planted on median strips and in other key sites in planter boxes as floral commemoratives and a recognisable Australian symbol of remembrance. While they also alluded to opium poppies, the use of these flowers provided another meaning and reading: that of the already memorialising Armistice Day red poppy. Adjacent to the poppy planters, red text was stencilled on the footpaths. The text included letters and stories about the overdose victims and their lives. The stories were gathered from a series of interviews with current intravenous drug users, friends and families of victims, and community workers, all of whom have been deeply affected by overdoses.

The embedded memorial collection consisted of a gathering of objects, photographs, text and images from an individual overdose victim's life. These objects were cast in thirty-five clear resin plaques and attached to the side of the poppy planters. The resin plaques were exposed, vulnerable and tactile. To discern the contents of the plaques, people had to crouch down and get very close. This was a deliberate attempt to encourage physical interaction with the memorial work. The physical proximity is in contrast to the traditional monument, represented as sacred and untouchable, often elevated out of reach on a pedestal and permitting only floral gestures to be placed underneath them.

This project struggled to engage and shift the meaning of conventional symbols and iconic landscape gestures in a more subtle direction. I attempted to subvert prevailing sentiment associated with red poppies, wanting to investigate how transferable a nationalistic and patriotic symbol, the poppy, could be. I also deliberately sited the work well within iconic landscapes of St Kilda which include Luna Park, Acland Street and the Town Hall. This was intended as a gesture of incrimination. If the official and unofficial symbolic hearts of St Kilda and its community were littered with this memorial,

shouldn't the people who inhabit them acknowledge victims who suffered and died there?

The location of the work in the everyday public realm of the streetscapes was thus a deliberate attempt to confront and challenge a largely apathetic public. The familiar objects collected and displayed as treasured mementos from an overdose victim's life reflected an interweaving of sentiment and personalisation with common, mundane possessions. While the decoration or design of memorials with such objects is common in private memorialising it is less accepted in the public realm. In both a metaphorical and a literal sense, *The Anti-Memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims* forces us to see and reflect upon the everyday in another, more exposed, direct and significant way. This project sought to present another side of the depersonalised 'category' of intravenous drug users.

While it is true that many users are not on the streets and lead apparently 'normal' lives, it asks that the general public to reject the more popular understanding of 'junkies' as human refuse, and to consider them more benevolently. It is not that in personalising the deaths the memorial sought to illicit sympathetic grief from strangers or question the adequacy of grieving by family and friends. It wanted to warn all exposed to it that the ability to dismiss individuals by dismissing a group, or an ability to dismiss a group through dismissive examination of some individuals, are equally dangerous ways to avoid consideration of a shared problem and our shared humanity. This capacity for empathy is the very thing which memorials purport to remind us of. Memorials awaken, exercise and expand our unfathomed capacities to remember and excite our need to share what we learn. They are not correctives to faulty memory but encouragements to active generosity.

UNFORSEEN REACTIONS

One of the unexpected outcomes of *The Anti-Memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims* was the way that members of the public interacted with the sites. A modicum of vandalism had been anticipated and was pre-empted by provisional back-up. Twice as many poppy plants were ordered, replacement plaques constructed and the work was regularly patrolled, especially on Grey Street. But only two pots of the three thousand poppy plants had to be replaced and this was on Fitzroy Street where a drunken patron unintentionally stumbled into them. On the other hand, there was an expectation that in some

instances the work would be ignored. As Robert Musil writes: 'There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument. They are no doubt erected to be seen, indeed, to attract attention. But at the same time, they are impregnated with something that repels attention.'⁵ During the three-week installation period, people left notes, cards, flowers and wrote messages in chalk on the footpaths adjacent to the work. Quite often they would not walk on the red words, bestowing a respect similar to that shown to grave sites. People caressed the plaques and one woman knelt down, kissed her hand and lovingly placed it on a photograph in a plaque.

Due to the close personal proximity with which I was connected to the project – having interviewed many friends and family members of the victims depicted in the work – it was deeply affecting to witness others, with whom I was not familiar, viscerally connect with the work. I had rationalised that because the work was recognisable as a temporary installation and because it was unavoidable, sited within everyday landscapes on the footpaths, and would at least prove readily engaging. I further hoped that rather than creating self-contained sites of memory, detached from our daily lives, this memorial would force both visitors and local citizens to look within themselves for memory, to evaluate their own actions and motives for memory within these spaces. The level of engagement and emotional reaction was, however, much more profound than anticipated.

I received numerous emails and letters from a range of sources which were both encouraging and scathing. Traders on Fitzroy Street, particularly the pharmacies who supply needles to drug users for minimal cost, protested vehemently before and during installation of the work. They felt attention was being brought to bear on St Kilda's reputation as a drug haven which was something they were working hard to change. As a deliberate reaction, I chose to site the memorials directly adjacent to the pharmacies. But attitudes did change. At the conclusion of the project, one of the pharmacist owners asked if he could keep the flowers and a resin plaque.

Another derisive review came from an anonymous drug user who commented as the work was being installed: 'I don't need this as a reminder... look at my arms, mate... less money on art and more on rehab.'⁶ This latter comment proved to be extremely confrontational

and posed a myriad of questions regarding the validity of the exercise.

While there is a tremendous realm of literature and discussion on the justification of art and design for the purposes of social consciousness-raising and educative, constructive purposes, I remain challenged by the thought that public art funding might compromise the improvement of vital medical services.

I raise this point as it emerges constantly as a key critique of the type of work I engage in. One response drawn from observations I have made throughout the various lives of all my design project works is that the discussion which the work raises is just as pertinent to the investigations as the physical interventions themselves. The influential life of a project is also far more than any particular moment of its built expression or discussion raised about that arbitrary moment. Jochen Speilmann dramatically widens the functions of the public monument. He includes 'Identification, representation, anticipation, interpretation and information. And the phase of preliminary discussions, the creative process and process of receptions are integral components of the monument itself.'⁷ The effectiveness of anti-memorials in particular lies in challenging the idea that the officially sanctioned object or sanctified ceremony located in a particular place and at a particular time alone have value or power.

THE SIEVX MEMORIAL, 2007

In October 2001 a small fishing boat sank in international waters, several hundred miles south of Indonesia. Of the approximately 160 women, 170 children and about 70 men, 353 died, some in the sinking and some after many hours in the water.⁸ Only forty people survived. They were refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan. The boat, named the SIEVX – from the Australian naval term, Suspect Illegal Entry Vessel number 10 – was only 19.5 metres long.⁹ Australian newspapers carried news of the event several days later. But in the midst of the national election campaign the story vanished until the recent memorial event.

THE MEMORIAL PROCESS

The SIEVX project was founded in 2002 by Steve Biddulph, a phycologist and parenting author, Rob Horsfeld, a uniting Church Minister and Beth Gibbings, an artist and project manager. It was

begun to draw attention to the greatest maritime tragedy in our region since World War Two.

A lack of media response and public concern surrounding this horrifying event prompted Biddulph and others to develop plans for a memorial to the victims. This was intended to recognise both personal and political issues that surrounded the event and to work positively toward a better understanding of problems that could avoid any similar future disasters. It was also an exploration of how we might be able to assist and share in the grief of the victims, something which memorials have always sought to do, but which becomes even more difficult when trying to reach across the divide of countries, cultures and even the dividing lines of the law. It is also something that becomes more urgent as we struggle to find ways to usefully assist in helping refugees of global crises currently involving the largest mass movements of people in human history.

A major focus of the memorial was to be the education of future generations. This was in part an acknowledgement that Australians had responsibility for such tragedies. Every secondary school in Australia received a letter inviting their participation in a collaborative effort to suggest design ideas for construction of a memorial place. As most Australians and every school child in the country at some stage officially visits the national capital to learn about their country's identity, Canberra was selected as the memorial's location. Over ten per cent of the country's schools responded to request a teaching kit and of these about 200 entries were received.

After the exhibition was collated, the SIEVX Memorial team asked for my assistance in furthering the cause. They prepared an exhibition of the collected works which travelled throughout major Australian cities in 2003 and 2004. It was through these exhibitions that the public became more aware of the SIEVX tragedy. The momentum to build a physical memorial increased and we finally selected the proposal of a year 11 Brisbane student, Mitchell Donaldson. It consisted of 353 poles which were to sweep through a gently undulating landscape, divide to form the abstract outline of a small boat and then trail off into the water. The individual poles which represented lost children were three feet high and those for adults were five feet high.

THE MEMORIAL EVENT

The memorial group again turned to the broader community to adorn the poles, inviting grieving family members, community and arts groups, schools at all levels from primary through to university and church groups to decorate a pole. A diverse range of communities participated in making the memorial, as both an educative experience and a collective act of remorse. In October of 2006 each pole travelled across the continent to Canberra. They were to be erected on the fifth anniversary of the event and left in place for three weeks. The arrangement of the poles would include the shape of a boat to the exact dimensions of the SIEVX, allowing visitors to walk amongst them, experiencing the small, confined space which held so many people.

Initially we petitioned the National Capitol Authority (NCA) for a temporary memorial artwork to be installed for three weeks in Canberra's Weston Park marking the five-year anniversary of the sinking. The NCA's policy on memorials required that in order for a memorial to be commissioned there must be a minimum of ten years following the event it commemorates. A controversial decision was made to hold a memorial event where the poles would be displayed and erected in a short, one-day ceremony. It is common for government policy and statutes like those of the NCA in Canberra, to insist that memorials only be erected years after the events they memorialise.¹⁰ This has several effects which are both intended and unintended.

There is firstly an assumption that the longevity of any concern for issues surrounding the event or people involved is a measure of their importance and universal value. There is also an assumption that time will render historical remembrance more accurate, or perhaps, if inaccurate, less important for its facts than for an abstract or universalising ideal. Most importantly, however, it denies the public a means by which to grieve and explore the issues and emotions that are raised by tragic events at the very time such assistance is needed. It fails to recognise the central role that memorials can play in providing powerful and searching catalysts for shared examination of current and on-going issues.

The press coverage which followed the decision to hold a one-day ceremony ensured that the memorial event would be well



SIEVX October 2006 Memorial Event (Both photographs Sue-Anne Ware)



2007 SIEVX Memorial In Ground Installation

attended and debated. It evolved into a form of public protest and grieving. On 15 October 2006 in Canberra's Weston Park almost 300 poles arrived and were lifted up by 600 volunteers, many of whom had travelled long distances to be there. Over 1400 others were in the audience including Sir William Deane and leaders of all the large religious denominations. They were addressed by the Australian Capital Territory's Chief Minister, Jon Stanhope, who gave a powerful speech. Before and after the ceremony crowds wandered amongst the poles which lay in situ on the ground, inspecting and touching their surfaces. During the ceremony, the poles were slowly erected for a brief moment of silence. It was by many accounts a deeply affecting experience of grief, remorse and hope for the future. In 2007 the poles were installed for a six week time period as a semi-

permanent public art project. We timed the installation and the commemoration event with the Federal election and at the time of writing this article we have filed for a one-year extension. The debate about the SIEVX memorial continues to bring to bare the nature of contemporary memorials and political polemics.

COMPARISONS

Both projects were largely successful as catalysts for testing ideas about Anti-Memorials. They encouraged multiple readings of contemporary political and social issues, prompted different levels of physical interactivity and emphasised the informal and the local as opposed to the formal and the national or even the universal ideal. They both shifted the subject of memorials from heroic figures to victims, to ordinary citizens and finally to those whom society ostracises. Both memorials differ from a traditional monument in that they are not sanctioned by civic authority but are purposely disturbing and provocative. *The Anti-Memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims* honoured people not often acknowledged by society as worthy of commemoration, people at the core of a contemporary debate about drug use, youth homelessness and prostitution. The SIEVX Memorial honoured Afghan and Iraqi refugees who since the 'war on terror' have been vilified by the media and the federal government.

Both memorials were public events: the Heroin Anti-memorial was part of a temporary arts festival and the SIEVX Memorial was widely advertised as a memorial event on the fifth anniversary of the victims' deaths. The temporal nature of the work was bound to the event: event culture requires that one must make the time to travel, see the work and in doing so become a part of the event. These memorials challenged traditional pre-conceptions of memorial objects as permanent in that the event itself dictated their eventual disappearance. The works offered a brief moment of commemoration while fundamentally questioning the nature of such remembrance, what is remembered and why. Both memorials were deeply connected with their landscapes, as are many traditional memorials, but seldom in a way that forces people to confront a social problem that affects their own locality.

The memorials also utilised the public realm as a site for revealing greater human agendas. The two memorial projects were also frameworks for the voices of others. The SIEVX Memorial event

invited a range of communities to participate and grieve in the loss of 353 women and children. Ultimately it evolved into a protest of the federal Howard government's attitude towards refugees. The Heroin Anti-memorial revealed personal narratives and the intimate lives of intravenous drug users. It was also a form of protest in the discussions it raises regarding the provision of safe injecting facilities which would prevent deaths. The St Kilda council was considering installing such a facility for the duration of the Melbourne Festival. The physical memorials in both cases became vehicles for political protests and debate.

The existing narrative of St Kilda's fabric weaves a diversity of stories: the tourist, the urbanite, the junkie, the resident and more. *The Anti-Memorial to Heroin Overdose Victims* literally placed the addicts' stories and personal narratives in each other's perceived territory. The project narrative shifts from being about place to being about the people who occupy place. The work juxtaposed the existing setting and stories of St Kilda with other layers of its history. Iconic landscapes within St Kilda were specifically chosen as sites for the work, constituting a part of my design strategy. In some ways, this



The Anti-memorial at Luna Park
(Photograph Sue-Anne Ware)

was intended to validate the lives of those affected by intravenous drug use and to acknowledge their literal place as part of the St Kilda community. In other ways, it was designed to examine the existing

narrative of the public realm and angle it to inform the memorial's complexity.

The siting of the *SIEVX Memorial* was particular to Canberra. The actual site where the ship sank is not accessible so a symbolic site was selected. Weston Park was significant because the NCA has just commissioned a series of civilian memorials to take place along Lake Burley Griffin and Kings Park. These memorials are for those ordinary citizens who have lost their lives while making Australia a better place. They include the National Emergency Service Workers Memorial and the National Police Memorial. The *SIEVX Memorial* was to be situated within this newly formed commemorative walk and mourns the loss of potential citizens. In addition, in the extended view beyond the park, stands Parliament House. The poles variously framed, ignored and at one strategic point directly marched towards it as a literal gesture of incrimination. This was subtle but effective.

CONCLUSIONS: THE ART OF FORGETTING

While they may honour the dead, memorials are ultimately for the living. All too often it is said that memorials are about teaching a sort of lesson, so that society will not forget the past and repeat its mistakes. To judge by the proliferation of memorials to date, these lessons have either been decidedly ineffectual, unclear or simply irrelevant to new problems. More accurately such an approach is itself flawed as the lessons can never fully articulate and solve specific problems just as history cannot comprehensively articulate a single truth.

The act of remembering implies a transformation of memories. Memorials need a certain flexibility to allow for this transformation. Memorial design must allow for this transformation as well as ultimately allowing us to forget. Temporary, ephemeral memorials or anti-memorials accept that forgetting is integral to memorial design.

James Young writes that public memory is constructed and that understanding events depends on this construction. He suggests that memory must undergo continual renewal in order for the subject of remembrance to stay vivid in our collective consciousness.¹¹ The memory work presented in this article hopes to illicit discussion and renewal of ongoing debates. Beyond grappling with temporary or ephemeral memorials or anti-memorials as negotiated built works, the projects explicitly engage in political activism as an unavoidable part of the search to understand and appreciate the forces which

direct, constrain and control our memory and habits of remembering. In this way the design outcomes become physical catalysts for social change.

The life-worlds of those affected by these tragedies and the everyday context of the public realm are the settings for these attempts to bring about change. The resolve of the work to comment on issues within contemporary society is vital to its effectiveness and argues that all memorialising as living, meaningful ritual must do this to be effective. The projects offer us a way of reconsidering our values and re-thinking our relationship to the world. The work also speculates on methods of active engagement with communities throughout a project's duration. The public realm becomes a democratic space that embodies certain types of social and cultural responsibilities. The role of contestation and cultural conflict over 'shared national values and ideals' critically frames the design of these contemporary memorials. However, these memorials also do something which is not often considered in many national and official memorials. They simply allow us to forget. They accept the frailty of human memory and human kindness and let us move on.

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writing*, translated by D. F. Krell, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1993, p365.
 - ² James E. Young, 'Germany's Memorial Question: Memory, Counter-Memory, and the End of the Monument', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol 96, no 4, Fall, 1997, p855.
 - ³ James E. Young, 'The Counter-Monument: Memory Against itself in Germany Today', *Critical Inquiry*, vol 18, Winter, 1992, p267.
 - ⁴ Melbourne Festival Events Public Programme, October 11 – November 3 2001, p50.
 - ⁵ Robert Musil, 'Monuments', in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, trans. Peter Wortsman, Eridano Press, Colorado, 1987, p61.
 - ⁶ Conversation with the Author on Grey Street, St Kilda October 2001, while installing work.
 - ⁷ Jochen Speilmann, *The Process is as Important as the Result*, Berlin, 1995 as quoted by Jeremy Melvin in 'Monument: Antimonument – Royal Academy Forum', *The Architectural Review*, October, 2002, p67.
 - ⁸ Don Greenlees, 'I have lost everything', *The Australian*, 23 October 2001, p4.

⁹ The SIEVX Memorial (online), 2006. Available:
<http://www.SIEVXmemorial.com/about.html> (Accessed 18 December 2006).

¹⁰ The National Capital Authority, *Guidelines for Commemorative Works in the National Capital*, The National Capital Authority, Canberra, August 2002, p9.

¹¹ James E. Young, 'At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust', *Contemporary Art and Architecture*, Yale University Press, London, 2000, p120.